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Controversy: An Instrument of Freedom

The right to differ without rancor is fundamental to any form of free inquiry. Indeed, it is basic to a free society. Unless men can differ without malice, differences become malicious and men who differ resort to malicious devices. "Mutual insult with impunity" may be an overstatement of a desirable goal, but it points us in the right direction.

My thesis is that the possibility of controversy is essential to freedom. And since I would not associate myself with any society other than a free society, I gladly welcome the possibility of controversy.

Not that there is any positive virtue in controversy for its own sake. Other things being equal, I am a man of peace, preferring a peaceful atmosphere preserved by peaceable men. And that is precisely why I insist that controversy must always be an open possibility. If the controversy which is natural in a free society were to be outlawed, then differences of opinion would be regarded as bad taste at best — and, at worst, as treasonous betrayals. In such a world, the notion of controversy itself would have become controversial and therefore taboo.

Possibility of Controversy Essential

On the contrary, I hold that the only issue which is not open to controversy is whether controversy is permissible. There is no other way to maintain and to promote freedom than to exercise it. If freedom is to be real, the possibility of advancing new ideas or old ideas must always be present. The possibility of controversy being open, needless controversy can be avoided.

There is a second reason why controversy must always be an open possibility. In the words of John Milton, "Controversy being permitted, falsehood will appear more false, and truth more true." If controversy were only a means of maintaining freedom it would justify itself; but when it is seen also as a means of unmasking falsehood and of clarifying man's understanding of truth, the method of controversy takes on pragmatic dimensions of strength.

In the third place, free controversy is the only method known to man whereby the heavy hand of forced conformity may be lifted while at the same time creative energies are released. There are two, and only two, methods of avoiding controversy. Neither of them is acceptable. The first method is, by force and compulsion to declare that only one position is acceptable and that all must accept it. This is totalitarianism — whether in government or in religion or in education. The result of denying the

possibility of controversy is a monolithic political state buttressed by a monolithic religion and served by a monolithic education. Uniformity of thought, of belief and of practice is demanded. Controversy is forbidden. The working tools of such a society are force and fear. The accusations of treason, heresy and subversion blanket the political, religious and educational life of the people. Controversy is forbidden. The police state becomes a reality.

The second and equally objectionable method of avoiding controversy is indifferentism. Nobody argues because nobody cares. This position holds that all ideas are equally acceptable, all moralities equally viable, all practices to be suffered with equal indifference. Under this alternative, one may think, believe, and act entirely as he pleases — provided only that he is ready to be completely indifferent to what others do and say and think. Thus, where all points of view are regarded as equally valid, there is no controversy; but anarchy is perilously avoided only by a quality of individual and group forbearance which, if successful, prevents all enthusiasms and results in a specious social blandness — a society where naively mediocre persons with suspended judgments are alternately horrified and bored at the notion of a passionate espousal of any cause or adherence to any set of values. The working tools of such a society are studied indifference and cultivated ennui and foppishness, in the actual and potential drying up of all creative impulses, the decay of art and morality, and the falling apart of the political structure.

Twin Evils

Totalitarianism and indifferentism are twin evils, so closely related to each other that with the passing of a single night, a society may move from one to the other.

The easy transition from indifference to tyranny and back again from tyranny to indifference is possible mainly because both of these methods lack the only ingredient which defeats them both — namely, they recognize no legitimate place for controversy in the affairs of men. Without the possibility of controversy, there is no way to break the repetitive cycle of vice following viciousness.

There is no better way to protect freedom than to exercise it. There is no better way to avoid conflict than to welcome the possibility of controversy. The free minds of free men will never submit either to the pressures of conformity or to the hysterias of fear. Unbowed and uncowed, free men will stand in the integrity of their freedom.